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MEET THE Millennials

An examination of the influences and attitudes
that have shaped today's college students.

BY ROGER CASEY

They're smart, high-achieving and confident. They're used to immediate gratification. They're tolerant. They value teamwork and pursue the approval of their elders.

They're worldly — often wise beyond their years. At the same time they've lived sheltered, heavily regimented lives, overseen every step of the way by their "helicopter parents."

They're today's college students.

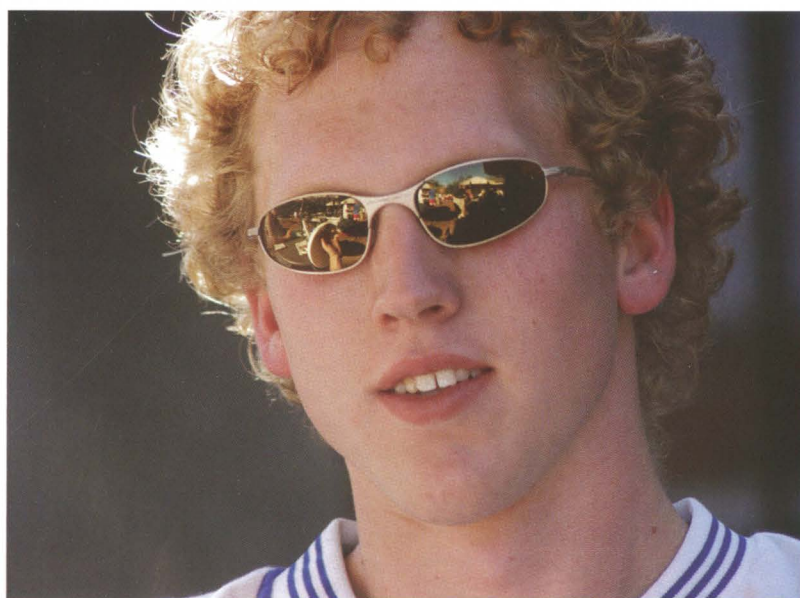
Call them the Millennials. They've also been referred to as the Echo Boomers and Generation Y, but they seem to prefer Millennials.

When the CBS newsmagazine "60 Minutes" did an in-depth story about the Millennials in October, they were described as a group in which "rules seem to have replaced rebellion, convention is winning out over individualism, and values are very traditional."

Why? What's different about today's young people? What distinguishes them from those that have come before?

On the following pages, Roger Casey, a 1983 Furman graduate who serves as dean of the faculty at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., delves into the influences and attitudes that have defined the lives — and shaped the futures — of tomorrow's leaders.





An interesting generational confluence fills the halls between classes at America's colleges and universities these days. An aging, predominantly Baby Boom professoriate now finds their former Generation X students finishing Ph.D.s and returning to college as faculty.

Occupying the current student role are the so-called Millennials — or Generation Y, to some. The first Millennial cohort entered college four years ago after graduating as the high school class of 2000 (hence the name). Now that Millennials dominate college student bodies, Boomers and X-ers are taking notice. Perhaps these collegians will become "The Next Great Generation," as Neil Howe and William Strauss subtitle *Millennials Rising*, their best-selling text on the children of the late Baby Boomers.

How do Millennials differ from their elders? Here's one example. Remember learning to ride a bicycle? For me, growing up in South Carolina in the 1960s, it was a red, pawn-shop special with pedal brakes. Dad ran behind with one hand on the plastic banana seat, letting go without my knowledge at some point. Of course, I fell and skinned my knee. "Get back on," he encouraged.

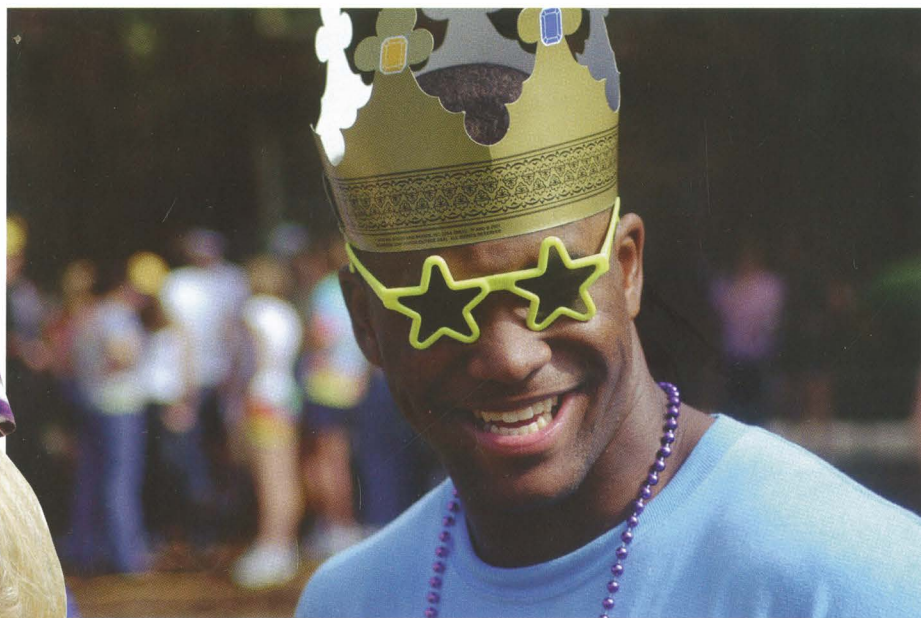
Contrast that scene with the education of a Millennial. First, there is the bike itself: a European or Japanese import that costs a little less than did the '72 Malibu I bought as a freshman at Furman. Next, Mom and Dad have probably read *Teaching Your Child to Bicycle Safely* — or at least watched the DVD. Perhaps they've sent Junior to bike safety school or hired a training consultant.

On the appointed morning of initiation, Mom, Dad and little Millennial set off for the park, bike nestled on the roof rack of the SUV. The entire event is being recorded by video camera. Before mounting the bike, little Millie is encased in a suit of plastic armor: helmet, knee pads, shoulder pads, chin strap, gloves. Yet, like all of us, she falls. She cries because her arm hurts, so she gets a visit to the hospital for an MRI because no one wants to ruin her chances of being a violinist

can "see": "Have you seen Justin Timberlake's latest song?" Phones have always been something you don't really "dial." And a television with 13 channels? Please — that's so 20th century!

While no generation can be defined with monolithic characteristics, several key themes dictate the overwhelming majority of Millennial childhoods.

■ Millennials have been protected and warned of external dangers at every crossroads, whether we're talking about bicycle safety equipment, CD ratings, the V-chip, child molestation, date rape, the Amber Alert, or sunblock with an SPF of 45. Yet, the Millennials have arguably grown up faster than any of their predecessors. They've been sexualized from an early age through media images of Britney, Internet sites, Abercrombie and Fitch (which sells thongs for teens



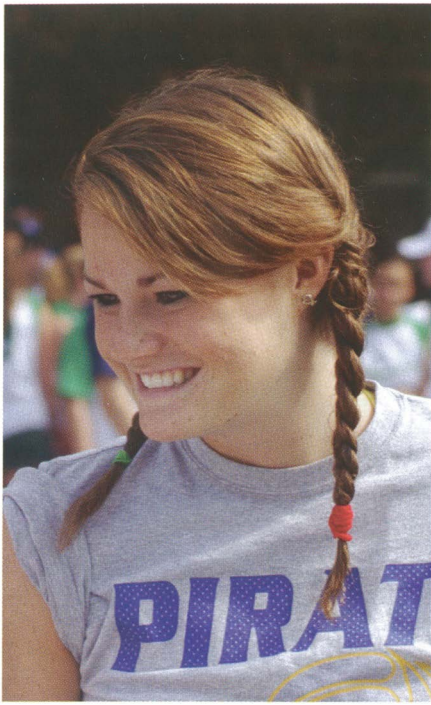
(lessons at 6) or a softball pitcher (practice at 3).

As my story illustrates, Millennials are the most protected, structured, watched-after, achievement-driven generation in American history. They are, as one Millennial parent actually said to me, "our little investment."

Born in 1982 and after, their formative years saw seemingly unbridled economic prosperity. They have never known a world without computers as a household appliance. Information has always been a click away (a double-click for really hard-to-find things). The latest music has always been something you

emblazoned with the phrase "eye candy"), and Congress investigating one president's sexual misadventures while his opponent sells Viagra on television.

■ Millennials are sedentary and/or sedated. Though this is a generation obsessed by X-Treme sports, most live the extreme vicariously through the Internet or video games. Teen obesity is rampant. Couch potatoes have been replaced by "surfers" who ride the virtual wavelength in front of a computer screen. The children of those who lived through the drug culture of the 1960s have a pharmaceutical culture of their own — but this one is prescription-based. Those



coping with attention-deficit disorders may have been on Ritalin for years. Many are on anti-depressants. In fact, what used to be called “adolescence” may now be called “depression,” and numerous Millennials seek medical relief from its pressures.

■ Millennials are heavily pressured by “branding.” Their world is bombarded with advertising texts and messages. Brand consciousness is enormous. Pepsi and Coke vie for exclusive contracts in certain school districts. Marketers pay to have brands like Nike or Gatorade mentioned in textbooks (from an algebra text: “How many pints of Gatorade does it take . . .”). Millions are spent to convince this generation to use its considerable disposable income on certain products or to look a certain way. Many eating disorders emanate from such cultural programming to look perfect.

■ Millennials’ lives have been hyper-structured and programmed. They go from school to soccer practice to violin lessons to Boy Scouts to the church choir, then return home to volumes of homework emanating from back-to-basics or testing-based curricula. The enormous backpacks teens carry to school make them look more like astronauts preparing for space travel than kids. Millennials were tested at age 3 to get into the best kindergarten so they could get into the best grammar school programs that led to the best high schools that lead to the best colleges. By the time many actually reach college, they are burned out or have little ability to organize their own lives in the relatively

structure-free world they discover in college, where no one else takes responsibility for their time. But even in college, many continue with lifestyles that leave little room for reflective space. Try scheduling a meeting with a group of college students and watch them pull out their Palm Pilots and struggle to find a common free moment.

■ Millennials are tech-savvy and gadget-rich. For them, the Mouse does not refer to Disney. Information is instantaneous — just a click away. PCs, Palm Pilots, digital phones, Googling, MP-3s, Wi-fi, e-mail — they are “connected.” Remarkably, some college students e-mail or cell-phone their parents four or five times a day. I remember wanting my parents to set my things out of the station wagon on move-in day at Furman, drive away quickly, and not return until graduation. Which brings us to . . .

■ Millennials love their parents. Good news for Mom and Dad. Bad news for independence. Some sociologists have suggested that Baby Boomers are reliving their teen and college years vicariously through their children. Parents thus have become much more involved with their childrens’ college educations. Most X-ers and Boomers couldn’t imagine their parents calling a professor or dean, yet such behavior is the norm for the Millennial parent. As an example, almost every phone call the office of the dean at Rollins College received last summer regarding fall course scheduling for first-year students came from parents, not students

themselves. I’m amused when parents use the possessive “our” to refer to a student’s schedule, as in “We received our materials about fall term. . . .”

Again, these descriptions are not meant to stereotype but rather to provide a sense of how today’s college student differs from her predecessors. Indeed, she is more likely to be a she. Women are becoming the significant majority of college students. And this she is more likely to be non-white. The percentage of Millennials who are Asian or Hispanic is significantly higher than for the last generation.

Understanding the Millennial generation is key to educating them. Colleges must expend considerable effort to create a technologically rich yet personally focused learning environment conducive to the needs of this next great generation. With their orientation toward achievement and the support of their elders, the Millennials have a tremendous future ahead. Our job as educators is to prepare them for it. In our post 9/11 world, never has the breadth and focus of a liberal arts education been so in need. ●

The author earned his Ph.D. from Florida State University. This article appeared in its original form in the Spring 2004 issue of the Rollins Alumni Record and is reprinted with permission.

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